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April 3, 2017

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Madam Secretary:

I am writing to request information regarding the Department of Education's implementation and oversight of federal programs aimed at supporting rural schools as well as the Department's plans to ensure that rural schools in my state and across the country can thrive.

America's rural schools provide great educational opportunities to young people across the country. For example, the *St. Louis Dispatch* recently reported that in 2016, several rural school districts received perfect performance scores from the state.¹ Education is a priority for all students throughout my state, but the success of rural schools is vital given that 70 percent of Missouri's 517 school districts are in rural areas.² Unfortunately, rural schools face numerous unique educational and financial challenges. Rural schools serve a greater proportion of students below the poverty line than schools in suburban areas and can often struggle to recruit and retain high-quality teachers.³ Public reports indicate that many rural school districts lack the enrollment and finances to support multiple schools.⁴

Recent events raise significant questions regarding how the federal government can best address many of the challenges facing rural schools. For example, in March, President Trump proposed decreasing the budget for the Department of Education by 13.5 percent, or \$9.2 billion,

¹ *This Small Rural School is One of Missouri's Biggest Education Successes*, *St. Louis Dispatch* (Jan 1, 2017) (online http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/this-small-rural-school-is-one-of-missouri-s-biggest/article_8ec6a110-8859-5582-916c-3b600bdfae52.html).

² *Id.*

³ *Betsy DeVos has a Rural Problem: Column*, *USA Today* (Feb. 2, 2017) (online <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/02/02/devos-rural-america-school-reform-column/97362016/>).

⁴ *Id.*

including cuts that would eliminate programs aimed at helping students in rural schools.⁵ The President's budget plan "would remove \$2.4 billion in grants for teacher training and \$1.2 billion in funding for summer- and after-school programs."⁶ These proposed cuts could have a significant adverse impact on rural schools especially because many rural districts lack the resources some urban and suburban school districts have to make up for these programs' elimination.⁷ It remains unclear how the Department plans to address or mitigate the devastating impact these cuts can have on schools across the country, particularly in rural areas.

The Department is also in the process of addressing questions related to its oversight of programs aimed at supporting schools in rural communities. In September 2016, the Office of Inspector General (ED OIG) conducted an audit of the Department's oversight of the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) which includes "initiatives designed to help rural districts that may lack the personnel and resources to compete effectively for Federal competitive grants."⁸ The Office of School Support and Rural Programs (SSRP), within the Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), administers and oversees REAP.⁹ While the Inspector General found that the Department's rural education coordination efforts "appear to be effective", the audit report also found that the SSRP has not adequately monitored REAP grantees' performance and use of funds.¹⁰ ED OIG indicated that monitoring plans for REAP were not developed and implemented and made several recommendations for reform.¹¹ These recommendations included that the Department ensure that SSRP staff develop, finalize, and implement adequate plans to monitor REAP grantees' performance toward achieving the program's goals and objectives.¹² The Department proactively began implementing these recommendations in 2016 and indicated that it was working to "improve the operation" of REAP and develop "a plan to expand capacity around rural education engagement and coordination."¹³

⁵ *Trump's Education Budget Revealed*, The Atlantic (Mar. 16, 2017) (online <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/03/trumps-education-budget-revealed/519837/>).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Trump's Budget Boosts Military but also Cuts GOP, Dems Favorites*, New Tribune (Mar. 17, 2017) (online <http://www.newtribune.com/news/national/story/2017/mar/17/trumps-budget-boosts-military-also-cuts-gop-dems-favorites/665816/>).

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Inspector General, *Audit of the Department's Oversight of the Rural Education Achievement Program* (Sep. 12, 2016) (online <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oig/auditreports/fy2016/a19p0006.pdf>).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

In order to better understand the Department's current efforts and going forward plans to support rural schools, please provide a written response to my office not later than close of business on April 17, 2017 that addresses the following questions:

1. Please provide an update on the status of the Department's implementation of ED OIG's recommendations found in its *Audit of the Department's Oversight of the Rural Education Achievement Program* report, including an outline of all closed and outstanding recommendations;
2. Please describe what additional steps the Department has taken to improve the operation of the Rural Education Achievement Program and the Department's oversight of program grantees;
3. Please describe the Department's ongoing plans to expand its capacity around rural education engagement and coordination;
4. Please describe what steps the Department has or will take to mitigate the impact of the Trump Administration's proposed cuts to Department initiatives that serve rural schools, including but not limited to, after-school programs; and
5. Please provide an outline of the Department's priorities as it relates to supporting rural schools during your tenure as Secretary.

Should you have any questions regarding this inquiry, please contact Donald Sherman on my staff at Donald_Sherman@hsgac.senate.gov or by phone at (202) 224-2627. Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this request. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member

cc: Ron Johnson
Chairman